



Photographer Ruth Maria Murphy's young family enjoy exploring the 85 private acres of land that the cottage sits on.

# THE LOST COTTAGE

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photography Ruth Maria Murphy words Lizzie Gore-Grimes

# watching the weather

here is hypnotising,” begins Brian Spain, owner of The Lost Cottage, which overlooks Carragh lake, near Glenbeigh in Kerry. “The vista is so big, you could spend hours just watching the weather patterns move across the sky.” The area is in fact designated as Ireland’s first International Dark Sky Reserve (with only three other European countries boasting areas with this designation). “On a clear night, the view of the Milky Way from here is exceptional.”

Born in Dublin, Brian has been coming to this part of Kerry “since before I could walk”, spending every school holiday at nearby Dooks all through his childhood. “I always knew I wanted to have a home here,” he says.

With his background in developing and running bars and restaurants, Brian spent five years living and working in Madrid and twenty in Paris. “In 2003, I came home for a visit from Paris and asked my friend Terence Murphy to come with me to look at a derelict cottage. The windows were blocked up, the roof was falling in, the floor was nothing more than mud, and a herd of wild goats had taken up residence. But... the view. Everyone thought I was mad. Terence immediately saw the potential.”

Brian bought it and took the following winter off, together with Terence, to work on it. “Terence is an artist,” states Brian. “I

was just a pair of hands.” Looking at the work Terence has done on the Lost Cottage (making each of the bespoke window frames, doors and most of the furniture), it’s clear that Brian is not exaggerating.

Through those winter months, Brian and Terence worked with the help of Edward Byrne of OldBuilders Company in Birr to painstakingly restore the cottage, with passionate attention to detail and heritage materials. “We made the new roof timbers out of larch wood cut from the forest behind

the cottage – Terry and I dragging them out with the Pajero – it got pretty hairy at times,” Brian recalls grinning.

“We knew we needed specialist help when it came to the lime render,” continues Brian, who called on Ed Byrne of the Traditional Lime Company in Carlow. Ed introduced Brian to Henry Thompson of OldBuilders, who then assisted with the interior and exterior rendering and hemp-lime insulation of the floors.

Although he boasts no official design training, other than a great eye, Brian designed, and Terence made, almost all the key pieces of furniture in the cottage. But there was nothing quick or easy about this exceptional renovation project, which continued on and off for more than ten years.

And even though Brian swore to himself, “I’d never mix my work life with Dooks, as it was always my place to retreat”, he moved back for good in 2018, enrolled his daughter in the local school and opened Emilie’s bakery in Glenbeigh (with business partner Emilie Mjorndal). Just this year, in July 2022, they went on to open a second Emilie’s bakery and café in Killorglin (both spaces designed and fitted out by Brian and Terence). Between running the cafés and managing the Lost Cottage as a holiday rental, Brian’s work and family life is now firmly ensconced in the Kingdom of Kerry.

But back to the renovation story. “It was 2016 before we completely finished the original part of the property (which includes the kitchen, living room and back twin bedroom),” continues Brian. “Then I began to start thinking about Phase 2.

Enter architect Maxime Laroussi, director of award-winning Urban Agency (the Dublin-based design agency with offices also in Copenhagen and Lyon), who Brian brought on board to design the extension.

What you see in the images – the extension to the rear of the original cottage, with a simple gable form and structure that mirrors the original vernacular building, is in fact made of poured concrete.

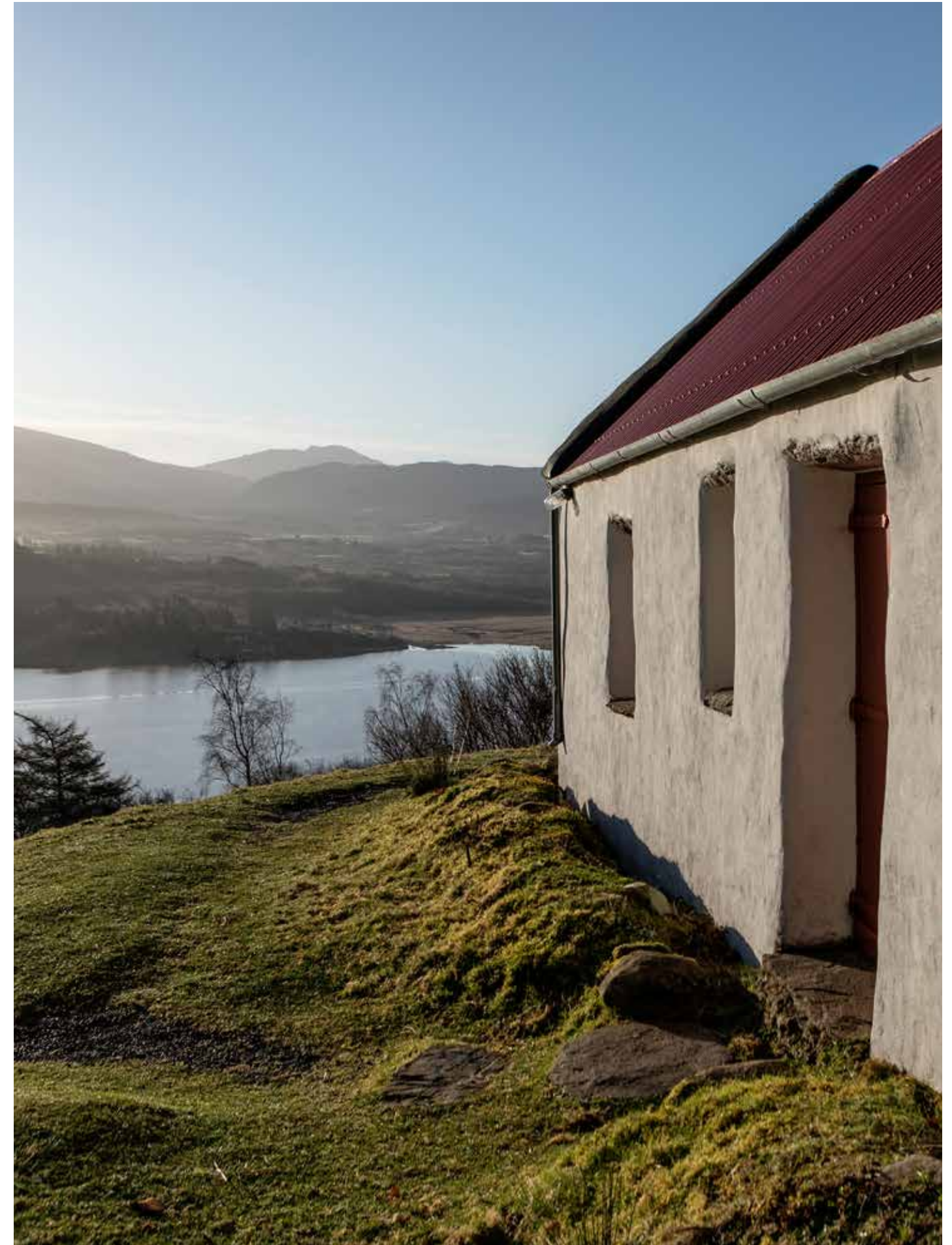
“We took inspiration from the Oberrealta Chapel,” Brian says as he shows me a picture of it on his phone. A tiny, yet completely perfect building; it looks like a sculpture of a house. Cast completely in concrete it has no gutters, no door, no window. Just a perfect square with an apex roof.

Speaking about the Lost Cottage project, Maxime Laroussi said that he “became inspired by how it was possible to use something that was a problem” like rust “and turn it into a beautiful solution”. He wanted to create something that, in patina, texture and tone, would sit well within the rugged Kerry landscape, and not only weather well, but deepen in character over time.

After much experimentation, Urban Agency discovered that iron-oxide powder, typically used to boost iron levels in soil,



**LEFT** The modern extension, designed by Urban Agency, added to the rear of the original cottage and linked by a glazed walkway, is in fact made of poured concrete. **RIGHT** The cottage overlooks Carragh lake, near Glenbeigh in Kerry.





The roof timbers were made out of larch wood cut from the forest behind the cottage, while most of the furniture, including the kitchen table and benches were designed by Brian and handmade by Terence. **OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT** As the cottage was completely derelict when owner Brian found it, each of the doors and window frames were made to measure, to replicate the original, by craftsman Terence Murphy of goodform.ie. Brian, who lived in Paris for 20 years, sourced the old French bistro fridge in France (now used as a pantry). Photographer Ruth Maria's children gaze out of the door that Brian and Terence designed and made specifically for the space so they could break through the gable end of the cottage to make the most of the view. Brian designed (and Terence made) the sofas to fit the space perfectly and double up as beds if needed.







The master bedroom boasts a breath-taking picture window wall to make the most of the exceptional view of Carragh Lake. "When guests first arrive," says owner Brian, "I like to keep the blind down, invite them to sit on the low slung Ligne Roset Togo sofa at the base of the bed, and then open the blind. You get a pretty impressive reaction every time!" **CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT** Sheep and wild goats regularly stroll past the window. The master bedroom in the modern extension building. "We used wide-plank Douglas Fir boards to build the formwork for the [poured concrete] extension building," explains Brian. Ingeniously Brian and Terence then went on to reuse those Douglas Fir boards to make various pieces of bespoke furniture throughout the house, including the headboard and bed base in this room.



could be mixed with water and used like paint on the surface of concrete to create this rustic, textured exterior.

“We used wide-plank Douglas Fir boards to build the formwork for the structure,” explains Brian, “which created the timber finish effect.” Ingeniously Brian and Terence then went on to reuse those Douglas Fir boards to make various pieces of bespoke furniture throughout the house, namely the kitchen table, the headboards, and bathroom countertop in the ensuite.

The result is a unique extension, in seamless concrete form, connected to the original cottage by a glazed link, which adds a master bedroom, complete with breath-taking picture window wall, and unique ensuite. “Lying in the sunken bath at night,” says Brian, “looking up through the skylight at the sweep of unfettered stars above, is very special.”

The Lost Cottage is available to rent through [uniquehomestays.com](http://uniquehomestays.com)

**ABOVE LEFT** The twin bed room, located off the sitting room, is part of the original cottage, painstakingly restored by owner Brian Spain and friend Terence Murphy. “I wanted to keep the colour palette throughout natural and neutral,” says Brian. “I think the colours of the surrounding landscape speak for themselves so I just wanted to reflect those soft tones in the interior.” **ABOVE RIGHT** The unique ensuite sits next to the master bedroom in the modern extension. “This corridor was going to lead into a third adjoining structure, but when we didn’t continue with that plan we decided to use the space as a bathroom,” says Brian. **RIGHT** The wooden bathroom countertop is crafted from the wide plank Douglas Fir boards used to make the formwork for the contemporary concrete extension structure. Ingenious.

